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TAGS: PGOV PREL PK RS  
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN REACTION TO POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN  
PAKISTAN

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Official Russian reaction to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto was swift but limited, with Putin publicly condemning the attack and the MFA calling for Pakistani parliamentary elections to be held as planned on January 8. MFA officials understood, however, that Musharraf's decision to postpone elections until February was necessitated by the unrest following Bhutto's death, and concern that the Pakistani President's political allies would have been defeated by Bhutto supporters. The MFA predicted that no party will win a majority in Parliament and a coalition government could be formed. The GOR believes a successful election would further Pakistani democratization and increase Musharraf's political legitimacy. The GOR continues to support the U.S. role in Pakistan and views in a positive light the close ties between the U.S. and senior Pakistani military leaders, including armed forces chief General Kayani. End summary.

GOR Remains Concerned About Pakistani Stability

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¶2. (U) Official Russian reaction to Bhutto's assassination was swift but limited, in keeping with the GOR's typically circumscribed public comments on Pakistan. On December 27, the day Bhutto was killed, Putin publicly condemned the assassination and noted that terrorism challenged not only Pakistan but the "international community." The MFA issued a statement calling upon all Pakistani political forces to show restraint in order to avoid further provoking extremists that hoped to take advantage of the "complex situation" that existed in advance of parliamentary elections. An MFA spokesman said Russia hoped elections would go ahead as scheduled on January 8. The long New Year - Orthodox Christmas holiday period stretching December 31 - January 7 led to limited commentary on the assassination and its consequences.

¶3. (C) MFA Pakistan Desk Chief Andrey Starkov told us on January 15 that the Bhutto assassination had significantly raised the profile of Pakistan within the GOR, which remained concerned about stability in the nuclear armed state. While Russia had called upon elections to go ahead as scheduled, the GOR understood Musharraf's decision to postpone elections until February 18. The rioting that followed Bhutto's death had to subside before elections could be held. Starkov also believed that Musharraf calculated delaying the election by a month would allow emotions to cool and prevent Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) from receiving a disproportionately high sympathy vote.

Elections to Further Pakistani Democracy

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¶4. (C) Starkov thought it likely that no party would win a

majority in parliamentary elections, and following a period of negotiations among political leaders, a coalition government could emerge. Although many Bhutto supporters are critical of Musharraf's failure to protect the former Prime Minister -- some even implicate Musharraf in the assassination -- the attempted political negotiations between the two in advance of elections could have set the stage for Bhutto's PPP and Musharraf's allies in the Pakistan Muslim League (PLM-Q) to form a coalition government.

¶5. (C) Starkov added that Russia considers Musharraf the legitimate President of Pakistan. He said that the upcoming parliamentary elections represented an opportunity for Musharraf to increase his legitimacy, especially if the PLM-Q did well, and expressed hope that free and fair elections would further Pakistan's democratization efforts.

Russia Supports U.S. Role in Pakistan

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¶6. (C) Although "too early" to assess General Kayani's leadership of the Pakistani military, Starkov thought it a positive factor that the General had strong ties to the U.S. military and was among those senior Pakistani officers who had received military training in the U.S. This experience helped provide the officers with a broader world view, in contrast with many of the more insular junior officers who had only been trained in Pakistan, and contributed to the Islamicization of the Pakistani military. Starkov commented favorably upon Kayani's several years as head of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), and dismissed reports that the ISI, or even rogue elements within the agency, may have ties to Islamic extremists.

¶7. (C) Starkov reiterated that the GOR supported U.S. assistance to Pakistan's fight against Islamic extremists. However, he hoped recent press reports of the U.S. considering unilateral action against Taliban or Al Qaeda in Pakistan were inaccurate, stressing that such a move would negatively impact public opinion and further weaken Musharraf's political standing.

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